



Tai Chi and Smoking Cessation: A Qualitative Study of the Role of Awareness

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INTRODUCTION

In an unpublished study on the impact of Tai Chi on smoking cessation, conducted by Jeff Morris and John Lewis at the University of Miami, seven of twelve participants who completed the program had quit smoking by the end of the twelve week session. Three more had quit smoking at the three month follow up. In Tai Chi classes at Fullerton College, conducted by Peter Gryffin, three students informed the instructor that they had quit smoking due to Tai Chi. Smoking cessation was not targeted in the latter classes. Motivations for smoking cessation were not addressed at either institution, but through thematic analysis of self-reports from participants learning Tai Chi, our investigation indicates enhanced awareness of smoking behavior is the primary internal mechanism for smoking cessation, as a result of the meditative aspect of Tai Chi practice.

THEORETICAL ASPECTS

Mindfulness Meditation has been popularized by Jon Kabat-Zinn, as a behavioral intervention aimed at transforming behavior through enhanced non-judgmental in-the-moment awareness. Awareness (Sati in Pali) is a major component in Buddhist philosophy as a means of eliminating destructive behavior and thoughts. Meditation is used as a tool to develop awareness of destructive habits and reactions, to enhance identification of cues triggering negative behavior. A basic premise is that the awareness and identification of cues instigating negative reactions is sufficient for creating awareness of cause and effect, and more importantly, a separation of self from behavior. Essentially a mental “stepping back,” allowing space for purposeful action, as opposed to uncontrolled and unconscious reaction.

RESULTS

Results from the Miami study indicate that Tai Chi practice contributes to smoking cessation. Thematic analysis of self-reports of smokers taking Tai Chi identified enhanced awareness of smoking habits as the major mechanism of change.

CONCLUSIONS

A major aspect of this study is the incidental nature of the effect of enhanced awareness and the practice of Tai Chi on smoking behavior. The students reported their states of enhanced awareness after the Tai Chi class, independently, and not as a planned element of Tai Chi instruction. Smoking cessation was not even targeted or mentioned in two of the classes. Enhancing awareness of unconscious habits, even something as obvious as putting a cigarette in your mouth, as well as enhanced awareness of smoking related cues, can trigger conscious control of smoking behavior. This suggests that mindfulness and awareness raising exercises such as sitting and moving meditation (Tai Chi in the case of this study) may modify negative behavior and addiction as an intrinsic factor. Meditative exercises may be a powerful aid to planned programs for smoking cessation and interventions for addiction. Tai Chi, as a more dynamic form of meditation with many ancillary health benefits, may be particularly beneficial as an awareness and mindfulness based exercise. The discipline aspect of Tai Chi as a martial art, and the stress-reducing component of Tai Chi as a relaxation exercise, may further contribute to the efficacy of Tai Chi for smoking cessation.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS:

- Highlights importance of awareness in breaking cycles of addiction and habit.
- Tai Chi can provide a more dynamic form of meditation and awareness training.
- Benefits of mindfulness and awareness through meditation may not need to be purposeful nor planned, and may be a natural byproduct of the process of meditation.